



Domestic Violence Response System in Uganda

A report by YouBelong Uganda Women for Women

1. Definition and Context

The Domestic Violence Act (2010) defines domestic violence as:

Any act or omission that occurs in a family or intimate relationship where a perpetrator harms, injures, or endangers the health, safety, life, limb or well-being whether mental or physical, of the victim, or tends to do so. This includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse, and economic abuse.

Globally, 1 in 3 women has been subjected to physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. According to The State of the Nation Population Report 36% women experience sexual violence, most often from a partner (National Planning Authority, 2025)

In Uganda, the lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence is among the highest in the world at approximately 55.5% (WHO, 2018).

Domestic violence directly impacts the mental wellbeing of women and adolescents in homes (NPA, 2025) and reduces family productivity, and the loss of human dignity. Despite its significant effects, repeated violence by the same partner remains common.

2. Help-Seeking Patterns in Uganda

Evidence shows that women experiencing violence primarily prefer support from family elders, friends, and religious leaders rather than formal service authorities.

Factors influencing this preference include;

- Protection of family image
- Fear of stigma
- Low awareness of available services
- Economic dependence on abusive partners
- Anticipated costs of formal services
- Fear or lack of confidence in approaching formal offices

Support at the informal level often includes advice, temporary shelter, counselling, and financial penalties or warnings to the abuser. However, penalties at this level are often too weak to effectively deter repeat violence.

A minimal percentage of women seek support from formal service authorities, including Local Councils, police, health centres, and the judiciary. This results in many perpetrators never facing formal accountability.

3. Reporting and Help-Seeking Patterns according to the Violence Against Women and Girls Survey, Uganda 2020)

Women told about physical violence in the previous 12 months

- 62% - Family
- 31% - Friends or neighbours
- 20% - Service authorities
- 31% - No one

Preferred source of help

- 66% — Would not like to receive further help
- 15% — Family
- 7% — Police
- 6% — Mother of partner
- 3% — Mother
- 3% — Religious leaders
- 2% — Health centre
- 7% — Others

These figures highlight the significant gap between violence experienced and formal accountability pursued.

4. Stakeholder Review Exercise

The YouBelong Women for Women Group conducted a review to assess the roles of stakeholders within the Domestic Violence Response System. Informal interviews were conducted with key actors to understand systemic barriers and bottlenecks in reporting and response.

Participants included a Principal Magistrate -Tororo District, Superintendent of police and in charge Family and Child protection Unit -Kawempe Division, Probation and Social Welfare Officers, and Community Development Officers and Local Council leaders from Bugoba A, Mutai Central, Kireka, and Bukaya East (Jinja and Buikwe Districts)

4.1. Roles Within the Domestic Violence Response System

Local Council Courts

Domestic violence cases are often first reported to the Local Council system (LCI–LCII). The LC court may mediate and reconcile, pass judgment within its jurisdiction, document evidence, testify in court, and refer cases to police. All criminal cases must be referred to the police.

Police

A police officer receiving a domestic violence complaint must assist in obtaining shelter, ensure medical examination where abuse is evident, inform victims of their rights, advise on lodging criminal complaints, and provide procedural guidance.

Family and Child Protection Unit

Handles family and child-related matters, mediates child maintenance issues, liaises with CSOs and shelters, and requests protection orders through Probation and Social Welfare Officers.

Civil Society Organisations

Provide psychosocial support, conduct follow-ups, make referrals, testify in court where necessary, advocate, and report cases.

Health Facilities

Provide medical care, accurately document injuries, inform victims of judicial options, and testify in court where required.

Courts

Hear evidence, issue protection orders, determine cases, pass judgment, and enforce sentences.

4.2. System Strengths

Interactions with stakeholders indicated that the community trusts local council leaders to deal with domestic violence. Also, the community recognizes that they can get support from the police, and this was partly attributed to the general perception of the police's role in ensuring social control

Trust in Local Council:

"Our people trust us and sometimes they follow our guidance." LC Woman Representative, Bukaya

Deterrence through clear orders

The Principal Magistrate described a case in which a widow was restored to her home after court-endorsed mediation. "Should somebody go against it then they can be brought for disobedience of that court order... So, it works."

Quick Police Response

"It is rapid. The police can go there and arrest the person... That approach is commonly used."
Principal Magistrate, Tororo

4.3. System Barriers

Interactions with stakeholders showed limited resources and weak reform measure as the major system barriers to deterring domestic violence

High Costs

"I refer to the police well knowing the victim cannot follow through. First, they need UGX 15,000 for transport." LC Chairperson, Bugoba

Under-resourced departments:

"The district is very big but our quarterly budget is UGX 200,000." Probation Officer, Buikwe

Limited infrastructure:

"We have one DV shelter under construction; the only shelter in this area. Many victims will need it."
Probation and Social Welfare Officer, Buikwe

Mediation prioritized over justice:

"I try so hard to settle things at this level. I wouldn't want to send couples to police." — CDO, Bukaya

Weak reform measures in prisons:

"You release them today and tomorrow they are back... prisons are not doing enough to rehabilitate these people." Principal Magistrate, Tororo

Concluding Observation

The Domestic Violence Response System in Uganda contains significant strengths, particularly community trust, respected protection orders and rapid police action but is constrained by economic barriers, limited institutional capacity, over-reliance on mediation, and weak rehabilitation systems.

The result is a system in which many women prefer informal pathways, and repeat violence remains insufficiently deterred.